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Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Central African Republic and on the activities of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in the Central African Republic

I. Introduction

1. The statement by the President of the Security Council dated 10 February 2000 (S/PRST/2000/5) requested me to keep the Council regularly informed about developments concerning the political, economic, social and security situation in the Central African Republic and the activities of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA). The Council also requested me to submit a report to it by 30 June 2000, at the latest, and every six months thereafter. The present report, the second in the series (see S/2000/639), is in response to that request.

2. As members of the Security Council will recall, the primary mission of BONUCA is: to support the Government's efforts to consolidate peace and national reconciliation; to strengthen democratic institutions; to undertake missions of good offices, if necessary; to monitor the human rights situation and contribute to the strengthening of national capacity for the promotion and protection of human rights; to monitor the security situation in the country and follow and assist with security-related reforms; and to facilitate the mobilization of international political support and resources for national reconstruction and economic recovery.

II. The political situation

3. Since I last reported to the Security Council, the political situation has been dominated by considerable tension in the relationship between the ruling party and the opposition. The Government has not engaged in a dialogue with the opposition. The opposition, which tends to adopt a confrontational approach in its activities, is trying by every possible means to seize the power that it was unable to win through the ballot box. That is one of the main reasons for the crisis currently gripping the country, which must be viewed against a backdrop of social tension and a precarious economic and security situation.

4. Since September 2000, rumours have persisted about an impending cabinet reshuffle, which might even result in the departure of the Prime Minister. These rumours, together with dissension within the ruling Movement for the Liberation of the Central African People (MPLC), have had a negative impact on the current political landscape in the Central African Republic.

5. The situation has been aggravated by a strike of civil service workers that the opposition is trying hard to exploit for political ends. There is no dialogue between the two parties. In June 2000, President Patassé agreed in principle to hold a meeting with political stakeholders and other key national players. I encouraged him to pursue this course of action in my letter to him of 18 September 2000.

6. President Patassé did not, however, favour dialogue with the opposition, stating that no constructive dialogue was possible with political opponents who were calling for his resignation. In the meantime, the opposition, with the exception of former President David Dacko, has rejected the notion of a

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national conference or a new forum, claiming that the conclusions of any such event would not be implemented.

7. The antagonism between the ruling party and the opposition has deepened over the past few weeks. On 19 December 2000, the 15 opposition parties in the Central African Republic attempted to hold a public rally in an open air stadium in Bangui, in defiance of a Government ban announced the previous evening because of the tense social climate prevailing in the country. The organizers went ahead with their rally, which was intended to protest the "discrimination between the opposition parties and MLPC and its allies" — the opposition believed that MLPC and its allies had held a rally on 10 December "in violation of legal procedure".

8. The opposition rally was dispersed by security forces. Seventy-three persons, including four members of Parliament, were detained for questioning. Following that incident, the opposition deputies boycotted the meetings of Parliament until its closure on 29 December.

9. The trial of those arrested took place on 29 December 2000 and on 3 January 2001. The tribunal sentenced the four parliamentarians to 15 days imprisonment and ordered the release of the others.

10. These events and the lack of dialogue between the country's political stakeholders are a serious obstacle to the sustainability of the democratic institutions established barely a year ago. However, I remain hopeful that the Prime Minister will rapidly follow through on his recent commitment to the opposition parties to facilitate their access to State-run media, thus paving the way for improved relations between the ruling party and the opposition.

III. The social situation

11. The unprecedented oil crisis, which erupted in June 2000, deepened and persisted through the months of July and August, bringing many socio-economic activities to a standstill.

12. The tension caused by the fuel crisis abated for only a brief period. The situation deteriorated again as a result of considerable unpaid arrears of wages (up to 30 months) coupled with their non-payment for the current period. Civil servants, at the behest of their trade unions, have frequently been on strike since October 2000. As a result of these strikes, the 2000/2001 school year has not yet started.

13. The current social situation in the country is explosive. On 14 November, young people, claiming to be members of a hitherto unknown group called the "Torch of Central Africa", held violent demonstrations not far from the BONUCA offices, vandalizing a number of vehicles. They said they were protesting the Government's inability to do anything about unpaid wages. Furthermore, on 17 November, students from the University of Bangui held anti-Government demonstrations, putting up barricades and blocking traffic. A BONUCA vehicle was attacked and damaged by the demonstrators and its occupant, a civilian police officer, was slightly wounded.

14. Tensions between the Government and the opposition have revived. All indications are that, in the absence of viable solutions and action by the Government to pay wages and salaries, the resentment of the civil servants will intensify.

IV. The human rights situation

15. Since my previous report to the Council, the practice of summary and extrajudicial executions seems to have diminished. This development has been welcomed by my Representative, who constantly drew the attention of the authorities to the need to put an end to repeated violations of individual rights.

16. In the area of strengthening national capacity, an intensive training course has allowed BONUCA to train, in partnership with the Government, about 300 law enforcement officers in human rights and humanitarian law. In addition, a national seminar was held in October on the role of Parliament in the promotion and protection of human rights. Early last month, a training workshop was organized for non-governmental organizations for the promotion of human rights.

17. The Office continued its efforts to publicize, through the press and radio, the fundamental principles of human rights, with the intention of reaching the various social and professional classes. In this context, several international human rights instruments ratified by the Central African Republic have been translated into the national language, Sango.

18. However, despite these efforts, another form of human rights violation has appeared in the Central African Republic: "neighbourhood justice". This type of popular justice has become commonplace, particularly in Bangui, where victims, in particular "witches" and armed robbers, are often beaten to death. Several cases of this type of justice were recorded in July and August 2000 in Bangui and in the countryside. The perpetrators generally cite their lack of confidence in State justice to justify their actions.

19. Furthermore, it should be noted that there are remaining concerns about the conditions of prisoners. Since my previous report, representatives from the Office have made numerous visits to detention centres in Bangui and in the interior of the country, meeting a total of 1,498 prisoners, of whom 10 per cent are women and children. The prisoners have been herded into the jails of police stations and gendarmerie brigades, which are rife with contagious diseases, in particular cholera, malaria and meningitis. Cases of deaths from malnutrition have been recorded, as have torture, inhuman and degrading treatment.

20. The living conditions of detainees in the Central African Republic are deplorable and below required international standards. The authorities have requested assistance from the international community for the construction of prisons or the rehabilitation of the Bangui central prison, which was destroyed during the mutinies of 1996 and 1997. Thus far there has been no response.

V. The security and military situation

21. The security situation is relatively calm. Since the murder, on 20 August 2000, of the Ambassador of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya to the Central African Republic by a group of armed individuals, no further acts of a serious nature have been reported. Incidents of hold-ups, armed robbery and illegal roadblocks have been reported, especially in the countryside. The military garrisons, whose recent deployment at Bouar, Bria and Zémio was made possible largely as a result of French military cooperation, are not yet fully operational and the Government is therefore unable to effectively combat this phenomenon.

22. In order to strengthen the capacities of law enforcement agencies, BONUCA has organized civilian police training courses for members of the Criminal Records Office, the Intelligence Service and the Accident Squad.

23. Efforts towards disarmament have continued. To date, 95 per cent of the heavy weapons that have been in circulation since the mutinies of 1996 and 1997 have been recovered, compared with 65 per cent of light weapons. While these results are encouraging, the overall situation still gives cause for some concern, mainly because of the proliferation and illicit circulation of new weapons, most of which originate from conflict areas in countries neighbouring the Central African Republic.

24. The process of restructuring the defence and security forces is also continuing. The Government can be credited with a number of specific actions in this area, including the modernization of the army, training of personnel, deployment of military units in the interior of the country, the reintegration of ex-mutineers into the army and the appointment of several of them to positions of responsibility.

25. Owing to the lack of financial resources and the delay by international partners in acting on the commitments made at the special donor meeting in New York, in May 2000, only limited progress has been made in the demobilization and reintegration programme. The programme has since been redesigned and restructured as "support for retraining" and has been suspended until the necessary resources can be mobilized.

VI. The economic situation

26. Because of the very negative impact of the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the Central African Republic, the country's economic situation is extremely critical. In fact, the economy of the Central African Republic as a whole has never recovered from the destruction of the socio-economic infrastructure that took place during the mutinies of 1996 and 1997 and, even more damaging, the continuing fuel crisis. The overall economic situation, already fragile, has worsened following the rupture in supplies of petroleum products. The country's growth rate has fallen to 3.3 per cent as opposed to the 5 per cent that had been forecast, and inflation has surged in the wake of sizeable increases in the prices of petroleum products.

27. Because of reduced tax revenues, the Central African Republic has been unable to put its finances on a sound footing or to fulfil its financial obligations. As a result, new domestic (salaries of public servants) and external (debt) arrearages have accumulated. It is only with the assistance of its bilateral partners and the international community that the Government of the Central African Republic can hope to overcome its current social and economic difficulties. A joint mission of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) visited the Central African Republic in October 2000 to undertake another assessment of the country's overall economic performance. The Bretton Woods institutions have noted with satisfaction the efforts made by the Government since their previous visit in February and March 2000.

28. In my letters to the President of the World Bank and the Managing Director of IMF of 28 November 2000, I drew attention to the need to take into account the efforts undertaken by the Government of the Central African Republic to fight corruption and reform public finances, with a view to helping the Government meet the financial challenges it is facing.

29. I am encouraged by the replies I have received. The decision of the World Bank to approve a partial waiver of the conditions attached to the release of the US$ 5 million second tranche of the fiscal consolidation credit is a step in the right direction. However, a substantial percentage of this amount will be used to service the country's debt. The remaining amount is not enough to help the Government deal with the problem of salary arrearages. IMF has informed me that the Government's request for debt relief under the enhanced initiative for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) is scheduled for approval early in 2001. The implementation of this programme will enable the Government to resume the regular payment of salaries and a gradual settlement of arrears in wages.

VII. The impact of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the Central African Republic

30. The conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, especially the fighting between the forces of President Kabila and those of the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC), led by Jean-Pierre Bemba, in the Congolese province of Equateur, neighbouring the Central African Republic, have caused a large number of refugees, particularly women and children, to flee towards border towns and villages in the Central African Republic. The number of refugees, about 10,000 during July and August, is currently thought to be approximately 8,000. Most of the refugees who have returned to their villages are said to come back regularly to refugee encampments.

31. Scattered among a dozen makeshift camps along the southern border of the Central African Republic, the refugees live in precarious conditions, involving lack of food, poor or inappropriate medical care and lack of medicines and pitiful accommodation. The security situation in the region has been relatively calm for some time, but porous boundaries and constant uncontrolled movements of refugees towards and from the conflict zone have raised fears of proliferation and illicit arms trafficking in the Central African Republic.

32. In some areas, the refugees, because of lack of shelter, have been billeted with local families, where they lack privacy, sharing the residents' crops and other basic commodities. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), supported by the other agencies of the United Nations system working locally, intends to redouble its efforts and accelerate work to prepare the site for the transfer of the refugees to the new site.

33. The Central African authorities themselves believe that, as a result of the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic "runs the double risk of a weakened economy and destabilization". The effects of the conflict are "negative, take many forms and are multisectoral".

34. In the light of this situation, in December 2000, I decided to send Mr. Amara Essy, the former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Côte d'Ivoire, as my Special Envoy to assess on the ground the multidimensional impact of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo, in particular its humanitarian, economic, social and security implications. On his return, Mr. Essy made pertinent recommendations, which may contribute to lessening the negative impact of that conflict. It is clear, however, that a solution to instability in the subregion depends on the restoration of peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

VIII. Observations

35. The situation in the Central African Republic is a source of great concern. On the political level, the lack of any dialogue between the Government and the opposition has not contributed to underpinning the country's young democratic institutions. The prolonged civil service strikes have increased the risk of social upheaval. The negative economy and social impact of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is compromising the progress made towards the consolidation of the fragile peace and stability in the country.

36. The Central African Government's expectations of the international community in general and the United Nations in particular are urgent and numerous. It is up to the Central Africans themselves to summon the political will and work towards national reconciliation. My Representative in Bangui is sparing no effort to help the parties favour dialogue over confrontation. In this regard, it is my sincere hope that President Patassé will soon take the necessary measures to lower the existing tension between his Government and the opposition.

37. The special meeting held in New York in May 2000 has not produced the desired results. I urge those Governments that made pledges during the meeting to disburse the promised funds so that the Government of the Central African Republic can meet the many-faceted challenges confronting it.

38. I am gratified that the Bretton Woods institutions are showing flexibility in their dialogue with the authorities of the Central African Republic and have started providing the assistance the Government desperately needs. I encourage them to remain constructively engaged in a collaborative effort to contribute to the social and political stability in that country.

39. The international community has invested much in the return of peace to the Central African Republic. I hope that it does not relax its efforts now, lest the tangible results it has helped bring about be lost, and the Central African Republic relapse into civil strife.

40. Finally, I should like to pay tribute to my Representative, Cheikh Tidiane Sy, and to the staff of BONUCA and of other United Nations agencies on the ground for their tireless efforts to contribute to peace and stability in the Central African Republic.